

Consolidating Gains in Northeast Syria

A Whole-of-Government Approach to Evaluating Civil Authority

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The following article builds on “Civil Authority in Manbij, Syria,” previously published in Military Review, May-June 2019.

Background

Following the August 2016 liberation of Manbij, Syria, planning for the next stage of the Defeat-ISIS campaign began with Raqqa clearly in the sights of the U.S. Special Operations Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (SOJTF-OIR) and its partner on the ground, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), comprised of Arab and Kurd forces. In April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared Raqqa the capital of the Islamic State (IS) caliphate, attracting thousands of foreign terrorist fighters to the capital and initiating three years of brutal terror across the city. Following the liberation of Tabqa, a city along the banks of the Euphrates and home to the Tabqa Dam, the SDF’s fifty-five thousand Arab and Kurdish fighters and approximately five hundred U.S. special operations advisors were ready for the push into the city.

The battle for Manbij and its messy humanitarian aftermath were fresh in the minds of leaders determined to avoid the same mistakes that slowed the delivery of essential humanitarian aid, slowed the growth of a civil authority in the city, and revealed gaps between U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) and United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID) Syria Transition Assistance and Response Team (START), and

their combined ability to assess emerging local governance in the region (see figure 1, page 98).

At the same time, the battle for Mosul in Iraq was underway. With a functioning government in Iraq, humanitarian actors had a key partner in preparing for the displaced persons, medical assistance, and essential services that would be required before, during, and after the battle. Centralized planning and an ability to preposition stocks close to the battle allowed for a much faster response—a response that was lacking in Manbij due to the lack of a functioning governing body in the area and little or no preplanning for what needed to be provided after the fighting stopped.

In planning for Raqqa, the humanitarian community was determined to avoid the gaps in humanitarian assistance that occurred in Manbij. In the weeks and months leading up to the battle for Raqqa, USAID, START, and START-FWD representatives, along with members of the SOJTF-OIR civil affairs staff and non-governmental organization leadership responsible for conducting humanitarian operations in northeast Syria conducted a series of planning sessions to coordinate prepositioning stocks of essential food and nonfood items that would be needed. This synchronized effort between interagency organizations and the Department of Defense (DOD) served to highlight areas where previous lack of planning had occurred and allowed synchronization of the activities that would need to occur as internally displaced persons left the area, to include where and when food would be delivered, the provision



Brig. Gen. Jonathan P. Braga, director of operations for the Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve, talks to shop owners 13 March 2018 about their concerns and impressions regarding the coalition-supported, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-led reconstruction of their city of Raqqa. Both residents expressed gratitude and confidence in the SDF, as well as concern in the number of remaining improvised explosive devices left by the Islamic State after they were militarily defeated in the city by the SDF. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Timothy Koster, U.S. Army)

of essential and nonessential humanitarian assistance, medical support, and other needs.

Like Manbij, the humanitarian assistance plan included partnering with a local civil council established by key local tribal leaders. The Raqqa Civil Council (RCC), established 18 April 2017, was organized along the same lines as the Manbij Civil Council (later renamed Democratic Civilian Administration of Manbij [DCAM]) with male and female copresidents (one of whom was Kurd and one Arab) and fourteen committees to oversee reconstruction, social affairs, finance, health, education, and other aspects of civilian life. The SDF, as was the case in Manbij, severed itself from civilian rule to allow its main focus to be the Defeat-ISIS campaign. This served to further distinguish the civilian-led governing bodies from the SDF, with the hope of reducing negative perceptions

of a Kurdish-led system of governance and addressing concerns emanating from Turkey.

Perceptions from Turkey would not change, however, from previously held beliefs that anything associated with the SDF (directly or indirectly) would be related to the Kurdish terrorist organization, the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). Turkey's negative stance toward anything related to the PKK resonated with leaders in U.S. European Command and other U.S. and international organizations, helping to create a schism within the interagency organizations where the RCC was concerned. This was not unexpected as Turkey is a NATO ally and was a close and valued partner for decades during the Cold War. Sometimes, however, blind hatred of an organization, like the kind Turkey holds toward the PKK and any of its affiliates, overshadows changes in those affiliates and



- Phase 0 ● Phase 1 ● Phase 2 ● Phase 3 ● Phase 4 ● Phase 5
- Opposition ■ Regime ■ ISIS ■ Syrian Democratic Forces/Kurd ■ Turkey
- 1 Assessment of Manbij Civil Council started with wide disparity between Department of Defense, geographic combatant commands, and Department of State (even between departments of Department of State).
 - 2 Work with Tabqah Civil Council/Raqqqa Civil Council began before liberation operations began in Raqqqa.
 - 3 Tabqah Civil Council/Raqqqa Civil Council officially formed by tribal elders in April 2017. Raqqqa Civil Council baseline assessment begun June 2017.

(Figure by author)

Figure 1. Zones of Control at Beginning of Civil Council Assessment, 31 May 2017

the positive impacts they may be making. According to *Military Times*, “Gen. Raymond Thomas, the commander of US Special Operations Command (SOCOM), said the U.S. asked the People’s Protection Unit, or YPG, to re-brand because of its alleged linkages to the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), an internationally designated terrorist group.”¹ The SDF went on to diversify its forces at U.S. request, adding up to twenty thousand Arabs to its ranks in an attempt to broaden its representation and acceptance in the region. Unfortunately, no amount of rebranding or diversification would help fight against its lineage.

Coupled with the negative perception from Turkey were active disinformation campaigns aimed at

increasing social divides between Arabs and Kurds, between the SDF and local internal security forces and the populations they were liberating, and between the DOD and other interagency leaders. Contributors to these disinformation campaigns likely included the Syrian Regime, Iran, Russia, Turkey, displaced leadership from the region, and other disenfranchised groups. The resulting schisms (especially Arab-Kurd and civilian-military) would ebb and flow across the battlefield and often resulted in skewed reporting when interviews were conducted with a small number of participants. Many times, interviews from a small sample of people were used as overarching evidence of deeper divisions in Syria than were actually present



on the ground as observed by members of SOJTF-OIR operating in the area.

Adding to the confusing and often conflicting reporting and the resulting perception was the lack of a common evaluation tool designed to measure the effectiveness of a civil body and its ability to provide governance to an area. The U.S. military does not have a clear way to evaluate the provision of governance—a task that is delegated to the Department of State (DOS) and its representatives on the ground. In this case, however, DOS representatives were located in Turkey and relied on secondhand reporting from their partners in the area. START was attempting to get personnel into Syria; however, this effort took months, and its movements and ability to interact with emerging civilian leadership were severely restricted due to security concerns expressed by DOS security services.

Despite this lack of START presence on the ground, SOJTF-OIR had civil affairs teams who were trained to evaluate civilian organizations but did not have consistent checklists to capture observations on the governing body's ability to provide governance. Early in the campaign to liberate northeast Syria, these civil

Medical equipment is delivered to a Raqqa Civil Council (RCC) medical facility 21 December 2017 in Khatunyah, Syria. The RCC's mission is to rehabilitate areas once controlled by the Islamic State through multiethnic, locally led governance. (Photo by Sgt. Elizabeth Barlow, U.S. Army)

affairs teams reported on governance in Manbij, but it was not until Brett McGurk, presidential envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL (Islamic State), visited Manbij, saw firsthand the conditions on the ground, and ordered START to take civil affairs team reporting as true and accurate that their assessments were valued by USAID and START leadership.

Making Sense through the Confusion

Leadership in the Civil Affairs Operations Division at USCENTCOM saw the need to create an assessment of the RCC that would represent the views of DOD and DOS leadership, but it recognized that additional allies and partners would need to be brought in to lend a nonpartisan view. The question asked at the time was if the RCC had the ability to provide governance functions through its council and committees. An important part

of this assessment was determining whether the members of the RCC were executing the duties necessary to grow the governance capability and not necessarily the provision of essential services. Because of the expected destruction of city services and the length of time it would take to rebuild and provide those services, the key was not whether the essential services were provided (at least initially) but whether the actions of the RCC kept the process moving forward on reestablishing said services.

The intent of the RCC assessment was to establish a recommendation to Gen. Joseph Votel, former USCENTCOM commander, on whether to endorse the RCC as it approached a promised election in May 2018 (twelve months after its formation). Establishing a baseline of effective governance by the RCC, with subsequent quarterly assessments combined with input from inter-agency partners and organizations with equities in a stable and resilient governance mechanism in Raqqa, would allow a clear, whole-of-government view and allow Votel to give his best military advice to the secretary of defense and National Security Council as they developed a Syrian strategy.

The overall RCC assessment was broken into four iterations. The baseline assessment covered the period of June to August 2017, followed by quarterly evaluations. The final assessment took place immediately prior to the scheduled May 2018 election. Creating a baseline was important to assess improvement in or decline of civil governance by the RCC over the twelve months in the evaluation period.



A Syrian Democratic Force member disarms an improvised explosive device (IED) during an exercise 18 October 2017 in Syria. IEDs were often left behind by the Islamic State to cause harm to civilians returning to their communities. (Photo courtesy of the Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve Twitter, [@CJTFOIR](#))

The methodology used during the four assessments would combine modeling of other successful civil councils (specifically DCAM), qualitative data where measurable results could be identified, and qualitative data points of atmospherics, highlights, and perceptions that paint a picture of success or failure. The involved groups



An annual meeting of Raqqa Civil Council's committees 7 January 2019 in Syria. (Photo courtesy of the Syrian Democratic Forces Press, <https://sdf-press.com/>)

strove to keep at the forefront that *it was the Raqqa Civil Council and its ability to plan, lead, and influence events on the ground that would be evaluated*—not necessarily the success or lack of success of the specific need being addressed. For example, one item assessed was how well the RCC was working through its subcommittees to assess, rehabilitate, and reopen hospitals. What was assessed was twofold: (1) the number of hospitals that were reopened compared to the number open preconflict (quantitative) and (2) perceptions/atmospherics about how the RCC was influencing the reopening of the hospitals (qualitative). The quantitative data would be easily acquired fact (three of ten hospitals reopened).

More challenging would be the qualitative assessment of how well the RCC was addressing the issue and would not be tied to a specific metric as much as it would be a subjective assessment of the RCC's overall effectiveness in addressing the metric. Potential data points would be whether the RCC was reaching out to healthcare leaders locally and abroad, working with demining agencies to clear the buildings, reaching out to the United Nations or nongovernmental organizations to coordinate for supplies to be delivered, etc. Modeling would come into question if the RCC reached out to the DCAM health committee for lessons learned during their return to normalization.

In the end, the success of the RCC would depend on the resiliency it possessed, the local popular support it developed over the next nine to twelve

months, and its ability to juggle competing demands from outside influencers such as the Syrian Regime, Turkey, the Autonomous Authority (governing body over much of northeast Syria), the United States, and ethnic and sectarian issues. The ability to conduct quarterly assessments and identify areas of strength and weakness, and more importantly, how to assist the

RCC successfully address some of those challenges would be key to its long-term viability.

A list of fifty questions was created and grouped into seven categories to determine whether the RCC would be a viable partner in governance and how to best focus U.S. efforts to support its continued development. Prior to the assessment, this list was provided to the participating organizations for their review and input to gain buy-in on the mechanism to be used. In the end, twenty-one participants were asked to provide feedback including Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, SOJTF-OIR, European Command, DOS, USAID, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, START, and START-Forward (all DOS elements consolidated their input prior to sending in to ensure a common DOS assessment was provided, thereby avoiding the different views that surfaced in assessing Manbij civil governance), several staff divisions at USCENTCOM headquarters, RAND Corporation, and Navanti Group. Additional inputs were also used from open-source reporting and United Nations assessments.

Non-DOD organizations were included to ensure a fair and representative assessment not skewed to a solely DOD viewpoint. RAND conducted a firm assessment of the methodology being used to ensure the assessment met rigorous standards of qualitative and quantitative analysis (rather than providing separate data inputs into the analysis). Allies and regional partners were also asked

to participate as several had forces in the region or could be asked to provide financial support in the future—unfortunately this final source of data did not bear fruit.

Once the data was submitted, each answer was weighted to calculate for a final score. For example, DOS responses weighed more regarding local council formation and governance, while rule of law—which included several questions regarding training and manning of internal security forces—was weighted to SOJTF-OIR responses. This ensured the organizations best poised to provide analysis of the metric were given greater weight than those who were less trained or unable to clearly measure success. The resulting scores were translated into

the typical bubble chart for viewing ease, but data remained available should questions arise. Once the final results were tabulated, results were sent back to the participants for comments and asked to concur or nonconcur with the results to ensure everyone's equities were clearly represented (see figure 2, page 103).

The success of the Manbij Civil Council served as a model of process and a baseline for defining areas of investigation and their milestones. As the RCC continued to grow and establish itself as the governing body in the area, it was able to reach several of these points over the twelve months of the assessment (see figure 3, page 104).

Risks

Identifying risks and the opportunities that presented

themselves was key in determining the progress the RCC was making toward stable governance, and several risks were identified early in the assessment process. Should the RCC fail to solidify and execute the basic governance functions, other potentially malign groups could emerge to fill the void—either IS or other violent extremist organizations such as Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib or elements of the Al-Nusra Front. Providing supplementary assistance through civil affairs teams and START-FWD personnel to nascent committees would increase RCC capabilities faster. Expanding influence of the new RCC and maintaining positive popular support would also be important in keeping support of the tribal sheikhs who initially supported the creating of and nominations of key personnel to the RCC. Long term, having a splintered local governance would weaken any potential bargaining position in negotiating a political solution for the region and the relationships built with key influencers in the area, with the United States and its allies, and with other state actors including Syria, Russia, and Turkey. Key to addressing this risk was the creation of a media committee capable of creating and executing a public relations campaign to influence local, regional, and international audiences supported by DOD and DOS activities.

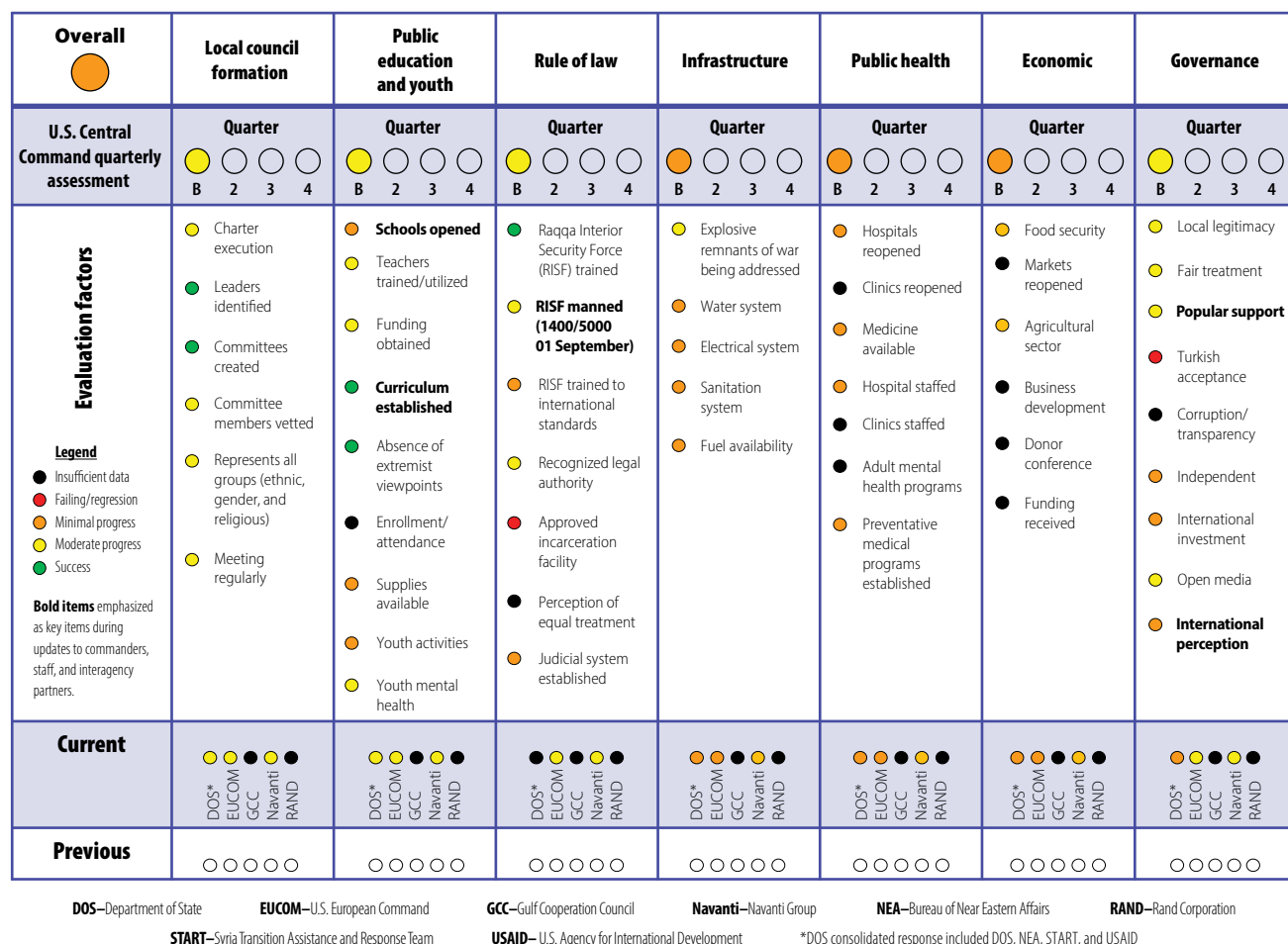
Finally, early on, nongovernmental organizations were working outside the RCC undermining its legitimacy. The threat of creating competing centers of power and influence was real and could have undermined the legitimacy of the RCC as the governing body in the area. A coordination mechanism was created within the RCC to enable closer coordination and deconfliction of the various initiatives underway. The response to each of these risks and opportunities during the twelve-month assessment showed a maturity among the volunteers who made up the RCC leadership and provided opportunities to grow its influence.

Key Takeaways

All the stakeholders involved in the whole-of-government assessment immediately saw the value of having a common assessment tool to ensure unity of effort. By sharing data provided from the participants, several changed their views of the RCC that had previously been based on misperceptions or hearsay rather than factual data.

The RCC was still in its early stages of growth and would take time to mature into its role, but without support from the U.S. government, the consolidation

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(Figure by author)

Figure 2. Baseline Assessment of the Raqqa Civil Council, 15 September 2017

of gains accomplished by the SDF and the liberation of the civilians from IS would have been lost in short order to a chaotic and dangerous environment. Rapid results needed to be seen; time was of the essence, and without immediate wins, popular support would have been at risk as detractors of the RCC would vie for influence in a government vacuum. After six weeks of interaction, START-FWD had changed its stance on the RCC, from a negative perception based on faulty reporting to a positive view bolstered by the understanding that no other body was emerging that had the potential to bring order to the chaos.

Finally, as expected, the planning for the restoration of essential services through the reconstruction committee and planning for the resumption of public education through the education committee saw the most growth. Requirements for equipment and resources for

clearing roads and rebuilding bridges were among the first identified by the RCC, hastening the most visible results (removal of rubble and improving transportation). Teachers were identified, certification classes held, and school supplies delivered to students who had not been in school for years. While the clearing of the school buildings of unexploded ordnance took time, the resiliency of the local culture showed through their efforts to replace windows and restore running water and heating.

The evaluation criteria were designed to be context specific, and as the region is undergoing ongoing change, criteria need to shift alongside. The three assessments conducted before the May 2018 election showed both steady progress and the need to keep evaluation criteria regularly updated.

Each assessment leading up to the May 2018 election demonstrated steady progress. Clinics were reopened,

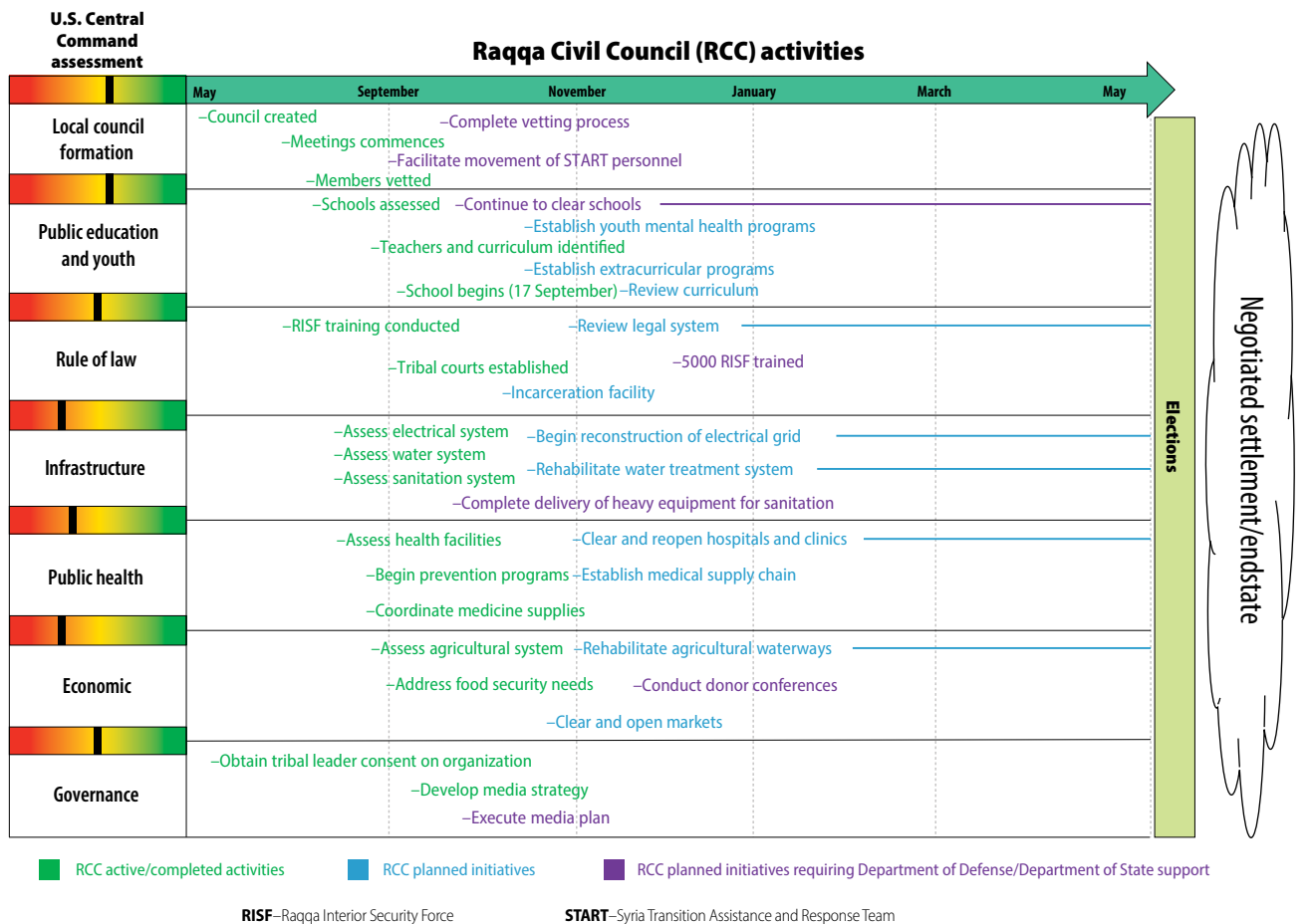


Figure 3. Tasks Based on Manbij Civil Council Modeling for Success, 15 September 2017

sporting events were held, security forces were trained, legal offices opened, and markets emerged providing needed supplies to a growing population. However, progress was not without challenges. Turkey continued its negative campaign against the RCC, claiming members had ties to the PKK and affiliated organizations labeled as terrorist groups by Turkey. Tribal rifts emerged as some Arabs strove to assert themselves and bristled under a Kurdish governance structure. Perceptions had to be constantly corrected and facts brought to bear to ensure participants in the assessments had as much data as possible to make clear assessments not based on faulty perceptions, misinformation, or conflicting information.

Moving Forward from the Final Assessment

During the final assessment in May 2018, Turkey had increased its propaganda campaign against the

RCC and was making threats of crossing the border to secure a buffer zone. This would fundamentally change the political dynamic in the region that resulted from Operation Euphrates Shield (a military operation from August 2016 to March 2017 during which Turkey occupied portions of northern Syria), and further assessments would require significant changes to the evaluation criteria to reflect the change in the situation. Another real-time change affecting future criteria is the growth of other civil councils in Dayr az-Zawr and Al-Shaddadi, as additional population centers were liberated from IS. The Syrian Democratic Council (the Kurdish political organization overseeing most of northeast Syria at the time) was pushing civil councils to join its membership, creating new emerging dynamics. These changes reinforced the need to ensure any assessment tool also matured and changed to reflect changes in the environment.

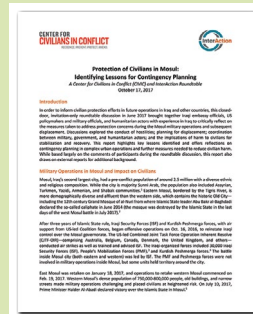
Another ongoing consideration for whole-of-government efforts to stabilize Syria is data collection. Collecting data—even in a permissive environment—was challenging. The constant changeover of personnel at START-FWD (often three-month tours or less) and SOJTF-OIR (six-month tours) presented difficulties in maintaining relationships with committee members as each change in personnel required starting those relationships and establishing trust from scratch. More and more, open-source data was used to provide data points, and the variety of sources to pull this from expanded, making it a challenge to ensure a complete picture with different points of view accurately represented.

According to Col. Tony Thacker, U.S. Central Command Civil Affairs Operations Division chief, one of the unintended, positive consequences of the assessment was how developing the assessment to look at the RCC created the gold standard for the interagency community writ large in informing and unify a whole-of-government approach. Future assessment tools should consider gathering input from the other participating members of interagency partners and the coalition to ensure early buy-in and agreement on the questions being used and the format for presenting the final results. Doing this early in the process allowed a common understanding of evaluation criteria and facilitated common views in the field, at USCENTCOM, and among interagency partner leadership.

Final Thoughts

The creation of an assessment tool that provided common inputs for a whole-of-government evaluation was important to establishing the validity of the RCC as a governing body. In the end, had the RCC not proven itself capable of addressing the issues in front of it—failed to include elements of Arabs, Kurd, Christians,

Turkmen, and other ethnic and sectarian groups, or failed to continue making progress on performing governance functions of essential services, rule of law, and economic revitalization—it is quite possible that some of the other competing civil organizations could have



For those interested in consolidating gains and stability operations as they relate to urban warfare, read the Center for Civilians in Conflict's *Protection of Civilians in Mosul: Identifying Lessons for Contingency Planning*. This report summarizes the background and key lessons learned (by participants in the conflict) associated with administering to the needs of the civilian population of Mosul, Iraq, during fighting for control of the city between the Islamic State and Iraqi government forces from 2016 to 2017. To view the report, visit <https://www.interaction.org/documents/protection-of-civilians-in-mosul-identifying-lessons-for-contingency-planning/>.

challenged the RCC for leadership. Challenges existed—and still exist today—with ethnic tensions, an uncertain future in the face of an uncertain peace agreement with the Syrian regime and Turkish interventions along the border, and remnants of IS and its supporters. Internally displaced persons and hundreds of thousands of refugees still need to return and be reintegrated in the region. Infrastructure needs to be rebuilt. And above all, trust rebuilt between communities.

The United States will continue to be called on to support the civil councils as they work to bring stability and a return to normalcy in the region. The United States has stated it will not be involved in reconstruction in Syria until a final peace agreement is reached, making the role of the new civil councils more important as Syrians strive to make due with less while facing years or decades of rebuilding. While the assessment of the RCC concluded on a positive note, the RCC's continued evolution faces an uncertain future. ■

Special thanks to Col. Tony Thacker, U.S. Central Command Civil Affairs Operations Division chief, who provided direction in the development of the evaluation framework.

Note

1. Shawn Snow, "SOCOM Commander: U.S. Asked YPG to Re-brand Because of Alleged Terrorist Link," *Military Times* (website), 22 July 2017, accessed 8 November 2019, <https://www.militarytimes.com/2017/07/22/socom-commander-us-asked-ypg-to-re-brand-be-cause-of-alleged-terrorist-link/>.

[com/2017/07/22/socom-commander-us-asked-ypg-to-re-brand-be-cause-of-alleged-terrorist-link/](https://www.militarytimes.com/2017/07/22/socom-commander-us-asked-ypg-to-re-brand-be-cause-of-alleged-terrorist-link/).